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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 002807

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (WLAWRENCE); NEA/FO (CUTRONA)

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SUBJECT: TUNISIA: UPDATE FROM MINISTER OF DEFENSE

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) The Ambassador December 27 reviewed a number of bilateral defense-related issues with Tunisian Minister of Defense Kamel Morjane, and briefed him on the November EUCOM Mediterranean Ambassador's conference in Stuttgart. The Ambassador emphasized the importance of linking Tunisian funding requests to its counterterrorism operations. Morjane stressed several times that the GOT valued its defense relationship with the U.S., despite the strong ties with the European/Med "5 plus 5" group, which had just gathered in Algiers.

REGIONAL SECURITY SITUATION/COOPERATION: Morjane was sober about the regional security threat; Tunisia was "aware that anything could happen," especially after the recent bombings in Amman, and was taking all measures to prevent and respond to attacks. He said that authorities were particularly anxious at this time of year because of the number of large gatherings taking place. Morjane said he regarded multinational cooperation as one key part of the counterterrorism effort; to the best of its ability, Tunisia participated in Mediterranean Dialogue meetings and intended to stay part of that process. The bilateral relationship remained very important as well. The Minister did add that Tunisia's defense forces received a number of requests for participation in various programs and events, making it difficult to respond to all. This should not be read as lack of interest on Tunisia's part, however. In fact, Morjane said he was creating a special sub-group at the Ministry to deal with NATO-related issues. Later in the conversation, Morjane brought up the increasing importance of security threats in the pan-Sahel region, and said that was all the more reason Tunisia needed to bolster its border surveillance systems.

SOFA: Morjane was positive on the proposed Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and indicated that he was meeting in the next few days with relevant Ministry officials to coordinate Tunisia's response to new language from the U.S. side. The Ambassador added that he planned a meeting with the Director of the Americas and Asia department at the MFA on the subject of the SOFA sometime in January.

FMF/IMET: The Ambassador told Morjane that U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan had severely stretched the foreign military assistance budget, but that there was a willingness in Washington to retain Tunisia's funding at as high a level as possible given those constraints. Morjane accepted the point, but said that Tunisia "counts very much on you," given the GOT's relatively low defense budget allocations. The Ambassador also briefed Morjane on the planned USD 6.8 million in drawdown authority for Tunisia, and again urged that ensuing requests be directly linked to improving CT capabilities. Morjane seemed well-informed on the topic and said a list of requested items would be forwarded very soon.

IRAQ TRAINING/ASSISTANCE: The Ambassador said that the recent elections in Iraq made it all the more important to

improve security there. He asked Morjane if Tunisia had given any thought to contributing in security or police force training in Iraq, or elsewhere for Iraqi officers. Morjane was evasive, and said that in his four months on the job (Morjane returned recently from Geneva) he had not received any requests for assistance from Iraq. He did promise to give the idea some consideration, but was not forthcoming.

DE-MINING ASSISTANCE: Morjane thanked the Ambassador for scheduled U.S. assistance in assessing the presence of dangerous land mines in Tunisia (including in the sea.) He said that they received an average of two reports per day of unexploded WWII ordinance from throughout Tunisia, or about 700-800 per year.

12. (C) Comment: Morjane's sober approach to the security situation in the Mediterranean reflects a better understanding than his immediate predecessor (M'henni) of the complexities of the current world environment and the benefits of developing cooperative ties internationally. This clearly arises from his time outside Tunisia, including in Geneva as deputy head of UNHCR, and we are optimistic that he may look more favorably on joint efforts with us and others on CT matters.

HUDSON